



Absolute impunity

WHAT were the architects of the 27th Amendment thinking when they decided to extend a lifetime of immunity from prosecution for select individuals? Even the prime minister found the idea problematic enough to publicly and immediately distance himself from it. For context, it had emerged that certain senators belonging to the PML-N had argued for lifetime immunity to be extended to the prime minister, along the same lines as what was proposed for the president and five-star-ranked armed forces officers in the draft 27th Amendment. However, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said he immediately ordered the withdrawal of this proposal upon learning of it, noting that, “As a matter of principle, an elected prime minister must remain fully accountable, both before the court of law and the people”. It is a commendable position, and one wonders whether the other beneficiaries paused to think of the moral implications of the move.

The controversial clauses, which grant lifetime immunity from criminal prosecution, arrest, or legal proceedings to the head of state and the highest military authorities, should not have been contemplated. The clauses give rise to the question: why would any upstanding citizen need such sweeping protections from the law? And what is the point of such an ‘honour’, considering that it would be useful only if its recipients indulge in controversial behaviour? The only justification seems to be that the law is often abused to heap misery on public figures once they fall out of favour. The history of cases brought against elected representatives provides ample evidence of why one should be wary of the Pakistani justice system. However, if that is the reasoning, why should such immunity be offered to select offices only? The Prime Minister’s Office, whose past occupants seem to have been disproportionately targeted in political witch-hunts, would seem to have a bigger claim on it.

But, as Mr Sharif has rightly pointed out, those who occupy high offices should remain fully accountable for their actions “as a matter of principle”. The idea that anyone can be, quite literally, above the law for their lifetime contradicts the idea of justice. The adage ‘power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely’ has endured through history for a reason: it accurately predicts that the more power and control an individual can exercise over others, the more likely they are to behave without restraint. Couple that with guaranteed immunity from any accountability for their actions, and it seems like a recipe for further empowering the recipients of unchecked authority. The idea of lifetime immunity also flies in the face of the social contract, under which leaders are supposed to serve the people, not the other way around. It is absurd that parliament has even considered it.

Turkish mediation

THOUGH the third round of Pak-Afghan peace talks may have fallen through in Istanbul last week, common friends of both states are redoubling efforts to try and find a negotiated solution, and prevent the resumption of hostilities. As per media reports, Turkish President Recep Erdogan is dispatching his foreign and defence ministers, as well as the head of Turkish intelligence, to Islamabad in order to try and resolve the Pak-Afghan deadlock. Mr Erdogan recently met Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in Baku, and has called for making the “ceasefire sustainable” and “permanently [ending] terrorist incidents”. That the Turkish leader is sending his top ministers indicates the seriousness of the effort. Turkiye and Qatar were in the forefront of arranging the ceasefire after last month’s flare-up between Islamabad and Kabul, and trying to establish long-term peace. In a related development, the Iranian foreign minister spoke by phone with his Pakistani and Afghan counterparts on Sunday. Abbas Araghchi again offered Tehran’s good offices to resolve Pak-Afghan differences.

These efforts indicate that regional states want a permanent solution to the Pak-Afghan dispute, and do not want the problem to metastasize into something more dangerous. Of course for this Kabul must take the lead by giving ironclad guarantees that terrorist groups based on its soil — such as the TTP — will not harm Pakistan. It is indeed Pakistan’s duty to oversee internal security. But this job becomes very difficult when Afghanistan gives dangerous militants a free pass to cross the border and create havoc inside this country. Along with Turkiye, Qatar and other Muslim states, Pakistan should also engage China in peacebuilding efforts with Afghanistan. After all, Islamabad, Beijing and Kabul all have a common platform in the shape of the foreign ministers’ dialogue. The last time all three FM’s met in August, China’s top diplomat reiterated the need to “combat transnational terrorist activities” and “eradicate the breeding ground of terrorism”. Kabul must be reminded of these commitments. The Taliban are hungry for foreign engagement and trade to shore up the Afghan economy. In this respect, together with the Turkish diplomatic push, Pakistan should work with Beijing and Moscow — as both states have commercial interests in Afghanistan — to get the Taliban to make verifiable commitments on terrorism. Together, these actions may force the Taliban to change their tune.

Renewables option

PAKISTAN must urgently modernise and expand its power grid in order to integrate large-scale renewable energy while maintaining system stability. A new report by the UN’s Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific says the country’s vast solar and wind potential could help it shift away from coal and fossil fuels towards affordable, carbon-free electricity. However, without a strong and reliable grid, Pakistan’s clean energy goals will not materialise, with an outdated transmission system threatening to derail the transition. In its 2025 *Review of Climate Ambition in Asia and the Pacific*, the ESCAP argues that a successful phase-down of coal will require not only technology and investment but also a “just transition” to prevent disproportionate impacts on workers, businesses and households. For this, clear targets, consistent policies and inclusive decision-making are required.

Large-scale renewables are central to resolving power sector challenges, especially those related to affordability and climate impact. Yet progress has been hampered by policy inconsistency and grid instability, which have prevented the complete transmission of wind power generated in Sindh. This is particularly concerning, given that renewable energy is clean, and solar and wind technologies are cheaper than local coal-based generation. It offers an opportunity Pakistan should not ignore if it wants to mitigate the costs of expensive energy for industries, exports and households. For a country facing intensifying climate pressures and volatile global energy markets, the case for renewables is compelling. But power sector politics and infrastructure are major obstacles. Investors continue to be wary of policy reversals, payment delay and bureaucratic hurdles. Long-term stability, institutional reform and investment in grid resilience can convert our solar and wind potential to dependable power generation. The report situates Pakistan’s experience within the broader Asia-Pacific context. The region has retained its position as a global leader in renewable energy, despite debt and climate stress. If others can, Pakistan can too.

OPINION



BY ARIFA NOOR

Slide into irrelevance

Nearly two decades later, television’s fire and innovation are a thing of the past.

BACK when I entered print journalism in Pakistan, the industry was small and vibrant. Other than Urdu, there were a handful of English-language newspapers but what they lacked in numbers they made up in purpose and impact. There was innovation enough to keep the readers interested. By the late 1990s, *The News* had introduced a colourful, political and comprehensive Sunday edition, which inspired others to follow suit. For instance, the fashion spread became a regular feature of the weekend edition. Later, *Dawn* introduced a comprehensive book review section and then another one on art. The *Daily Times* started covering private social events such as parties or weddings which proved to be a hit. It wasn’t long before other papers were doing this.

News reporting was not ignored either. Decades later, I can still remember the excitement of reading the parliament diary or extensive coverage of sectarian issues. Even during the 2005 earthquake, newspapers provided excellent coverage of the humanitarian crisis we faced.

But this trend of innovation slowed down and more or less came to an end once television entered the media fray. Till the noughties, there was talk of the need to evolve as television took over the responsibility of breaking the news but the process of adaptation or evolution remained very slow in comparison. In fact, it rarely went beyond talk.

Perhaps the ad revenues for print shrunk; perhaps the journalists left for television’s greener pastures where salaries were better. Media owners too preferred a medium where the impact, as well as the bottom line, was greater. Whatever the reason, newspapers no longer remained a priority. And this happened as the electronic industry took over, around the time that Musharraf made an exit and the PPP and PML-N settled in.

In those early days, television was the place of innovation and chaos, all at once. Television screens were full of quirky hosts and guests. But television was vibrant; there were shows where politicians took each other on but also prime time shows on religion and so much more. There were shows on social issues such as incest or rape. I have written before on how fascinated I was by Geo and Hina Bayat’s efforts in this category. And audience-based shows and documentaries. The fare included the successors to shows such as PTV’s *50-50*, which were comprised of different skits and, reflecting the newfound freedom, mimicked politicians. The actors who played Zardari or Musharraf or Imran Khan on *Hum Sab Umeed Se Hain* were well known as was the author of the show. Political leaders back then didn’t take umbrage at these shows and neither were party heads sacred cows.

Television was also edgy and so was the satire it offered. Begum Nawazish Ali, who invited people to her salon for interviews and a bit of a flirtation, took everyone by surprise. A man dressed up as a woman in a sari, she was such a sensation that politicians too weren’t averse to her invitation and some gave as good as they got. The begum was such a novelty in a conservative country battling extremism that she was profiled more than once in the Western press.

This is not to say that all was good. Talk shows often descended into shouting matches. Hosts got into the habit of speaking as much as the guests and then crossed the line as they covered the death and mayhem of the 2005 earthquake. But it was a new medium and back then we had hopes of evolving standards and red lines. The hope, in some cases, simply remained a hope.

Indeed, nearly two decades later, that initial fire and innovation are a thing of the past. It is hard to remember the last time that any news channel tried to innovate. The pattern is set — there will be news bulletins and the rest of the

cycle will be talks shows — from seven to eight; eight to nine; 10 to 11; and then 11 to midnight. The last programme varies a bit from channel to channel, but the rest of the hours hardly do. In the other hours, politics dominates and a host asks questions of either one or two or three guests. And the guests too are more or less the same — across channels and across hours. We know in advance what each one will say and what line they will take.

Social issues and documentaries are also in the past. So is the humour of the earlier years. Anything more innovative or original is not possible now. The morning and afternoon hours are when channels broadcast various press conferences — of mostly those in government in one place or the other because these are the people who have ads to offer.

And this is rather reminiscent of the ennui that once afflicted print. It was hard to predict back then that this sense of comfort was simply leading the way into irrelevance. In hindsight, it seems hard to understand why there wasn’t more concern about it. And now, the electronic media is headed in the same direction. As with print, it seems we are at a similar moment where everyone in the medium is aware of the problems, the weaknesses and the disinterest of the audience but no one is willing to act. The comfort of sticking with the familiar is far too easy.

So we talk about people turning to social media, which is providing information, innovation and perhaps more interesting content. There are documentaries, news, interviews, and it’s also able to evade the censorship which hobbles us. But television flexes its muscles at the big money coming its way and thinks the rest — credibility, audiences, staleness — doesn’t matter. But for how long? It might be too late, far too quickly. ■

The writer is a journalist.

PRICE DEREGULATION RAISES
MEDICINE COSTS BY 32pc



ZIMCOOR



BY JAWED NAQVI

Fearing the spectre of Godot

IS Zohran Mamdani a communist as Donald Trump claims he is? Or, likelier still, he is the Godot that Vladimir and Estragon were waiting for sans hope? On his part, Zohran Mamdani says he is a democratic socialist, a nomenclature subtly distinct from Europe’s tamed or confused social democrats of yore. It would be adequate for his teeming fans though if he were just a socialist with Zohrani characteristics, somewhat like the Chinese who are giving Donald Trump a run for his money with an innovation called socialism with Chinese characteristics.

We need to step back in time to figure out which description suits Mamdani better. First off, he is clearly not the spectre Karl Marx had threatened Europe’s colonial capitalists with in 1848. The Marxian apparition of an egalitarian revolt did terrify Europe but the quest took an unplanned turn. It prompted, instead, a response from the bourgeoisie so vicious that it continues to ricochet 177 years after the *Communist Manifesto* was published. Churchill, Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Bandera, Golwalkar, McCarthy, Ayub Khan, Pinochet, Reagan, Thatcher, Zia all come to mind readily as lead players deployed around the globe to vacate the occasionally real but mostly imagined communist threat.

The bourgeoisie set up religio-cultural structures and patronised existing ones — Nazis, fascists, Ku Klux Klan, apartheid to arrest or retard the spectre of egalitarian unity. They freely used a preponderance of religious gullibility in South Asia to challenge and subdue ‘communist godlessness’. The success was partial. The Marxian spectre would find expression where it was least expected — in Russia, China and eventually in Vietnam and Cuba, and also less durably elsewhere. For Mamdani’s politics, the 1957 Kerala experiment seems relevant — a communist government in a bourgeois state.

Occasionally, the bourgeois zeal to place roadblocks for communist prospects has gone awry. As Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein overreached his genius and produced a monstrous antidote to his own quest, the bourgeoisie would throw up a Narendra Modi here or a Donald Trump there to their own chagrin. If Mamdani’s victory march could transcend the insurmountable obstacles on his way to mayorship of New York, it owed at least

partly to right-wing chaos amid a surge of anti-Netanyahu sentiment in their ranks. That greatly impaired the clout of Mamdani’s Zionist opponents.

The importance of the Charlie Kirk tragedy has not been fully grasped by the world for the havoc it wreaked on the American right even as it nearly wrecked Zionism’s America nexus. It so happened that both, the American right and Zionism were in Mamdani’s crosshairs, and it would perhaps help to see how Kirk’s assassination unleashed a chain of events that possibly prompted the suspension of carnage in Gaza and triggered a backlash within

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MAGA spaces. It was this backlash that would help not only Mamdani’s electoral bid but also shore up the chances of pro-establishment Democratic opponents of Trump in the races that took place in different states for assorted posts simultaneously.

The sniper shot that struck Kirk had also lacerated the Zionist pulpit — the American Israel Public Affairs Committee — that far too many US presidents had genuflected before.

It was the Jewish anti-Zionist journalist Max Blumenthal’s investigations that revealed the terror Benjamin Netanyahu felt with Charlie Kirk’s killing. How often have we seen Netanyahu appearing on TV post-haste to condole the passing of a rapidly evolving patron-turned-critic of Israel that Charlie Kirk had become. The moping TV appearance was seen as Netanyahu’s way of screaming that the murmurs of an Israeli hand in Kirk’s death were false. However, the martyrdom of Palestinian women and children had after all triggered an intensive review of the state of play within the MAGA movement, and Kirk was shap-

ing to become its loudest spokesman. The media influencer had the wherewithal to heave Trump over the victory line in November 2024 and he had the capacity to cry halt to America’s boundless support to Netanyahu’s Israel. His death a month before his 32nd birthday inevitably derailed the politics of Andrew Cuomo and helped sift the Zionists from New York’s Jews. In so doing, it helped create a new middle ground that would rise in support for Mamdani.

The left and the right have come together often enough in history although not always intentionally, as they did, for example, to topple the Shah of Iran. They also came together to unseat Indira Gandhi in 1977. It is of course equally true that there is little truly sacrosanct about the left and its erstwhile allure today. There was a time when Nikita Khrushchev could see a life of friendship with president Kennedy, particularly after they precipitated the crisis and then deftly and with courage took the world back from the brink of nuclear holocaust. Kennedy while seeking cohabitation with communism was also an ardent critic of Israeli influence in American affairs. He was laid low.

Zohran Mamdani was born in October 1991, the year the Soviet Union collapsed. His father would have told him of how almost immediately after the fall of the USSR and the end of the Cold War it brought about, a new word was added to describe democracy. It would henceforth be known as ‘free market democracy’. *SPAN Magazine* published by the US Embassy in Delhi would trim its size. While claiming to save paper, it in fact no longer needed the propaganda budget. The deed, as Shakespeare said, was done. The propaganda agencies had delivered excellently on their promise. My brother and I memorised JFK’s classic inaugural address, whose paper-thin vinyl records were distributed by the US library in Lucknow.

In Samuel Beckett’s play, *Godot* is an intentionally ambiguous character who serves as a symbol for hope, purpose, or a higher power, and his identity is left to the audience to define. That could be an acceptable way to describe the phenomenon called Zohran Kwame Mamdani. ■

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